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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Another long and tiring week, both mentally and physically! When I wasn't working, I've been researching and filling out forms with regard to trying to get started settling my father's estate. Talking to lawyers, etc. to determine what I'm doing, and how to do it. I'm hoping that things start to progress in a positive direction in the coming weeks, but things could get ugly. People, heed my advice from a couple of weeks ago - prepare for yourself and your family, and save everyone from a ton of needless anxiety!

Seasonal weather has returned, but the signs of Spring have still begun to bloom, literally. Not to mention the downsides of the season - tons of pollen and other allergens! I'll survive! And it's nice to see the lawn starting to turn green again; it's time to get the riding mower ready for another busy season.

So, let's get beyond the weather and personal matters, and get down to the real reason you're all here again this week!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Valve's 'Steam Box' Gaming Console!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Microsoft, Sony Looking To Kill Used Games Ma
rket!

The Next PlayStation is Called Orbis!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Microsoft, Sony Looking To Kill Used Games Market

The rumour mill for the next generation of video game consoles has been churning out some juicy stuff these past few months. While Nintendo has laid most of its cards out on the table, Microsoft and Sony have remained tight-lipped, probably because their consoles are still seeing increased sales. So, we have to rely on rumours, and those rumours have one thing in common: Microsoft and Sony want to eliminate the used games market.

Many games studios have been hard at work trying to find ways to screw over people who buy used games. We've seen countless cases of launch-day downloadable content, for instance; parts of finished games are locked away behind codes you can only use once. Buy the game used, and you have to pay for new codes to unlock the missing parts. Another new staple of console gaming: codes that unlock multiplayer.

I had to enter four Windows serial key-sized codes when starting up Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning. Using a controller.

All this is being done to address the "problem" of used games sales. Companies that sell used games, like GameStop in the US or GameMania here in The Netherlands (thank god for GameMania), are doing very well, and it's easy to see why: I'm an avid gamer, but at $60 a pop, I'm only willing to buy 3-4 games new each year. Most games are simply not worth that hefty price tag, so I'd much rather wait until they hit the used market, usually only a few weeks after release.

The "problem" is that games studios and distributors do not benefit from these used games sales. Adopting RIAA-Logic, the games industry equates every used games sale as a lost new game sale, and as such, we're actually pirates, just without the ability to legally or morally declare us so. This "problem" is something they want to address.

And thus, the rumours around the next PlayStation and the next Xbox all talk of measures to disallow used games sales. The latest round of rumours about the next PlayStation state that Sony wants to tie every game you buy to your PSN account, making it impossible to sell them on, effectively killing the used games market. It could be that buying a used game will have it locked in a trial mode, unlockable to the full version for a fee.

On top of that, it would also kill the ability to loan games to friends - something I regularly do. If a friend buys a game I'm not willing to spend money on but still want to play, I just borrow it instead. These new rumoured measures would make that impossible.

Of course, the future of console gaming is digital distribution only, much like current mobile games, which would also kill all these abilities. We're pretty much at a crossroads in console gaming, and if Microsoft and Sony really do feel comfortable enough to obliterate game borrowing and the used games market with the next generation of consoles, I will most likely just start PC gaming instead.

Aside from this bit of information about the next PlayStation, Kotaku also has some preliminary specifications: it's got an AMD x86 processor (yup, no backwards compatibility), and an AMD Southern Islands GPU, capable of hitting 4096x2160 pixels. Developer kits have already been sent out, including updated kits. It's supposed to be released during the holiday season in 2013.

Both these rumours and the rumours about the next Xbox give, in my opinion,

credence to the rumours that Valve is working on a hardware project of its own - probably a set of minimum regular PC specifications developers can target. Valve has been trying to get Steam onto consoles, and while it has seen some success with this on the PS3, the Xbox remains completely elusive due to Microsoft’s reticence.

While Valve is denying these rumours - very, very vaguely with lots of wiggle room and weasel words - it wouldn’t surprise me at all that Valve is thinking about and working on some sort of project to compete directly with Sony and Microsoft. Even heavier locked-down consoles limit Steams growth potential, something Valve could address with relatively cheap, pre-configured Steam PCs, ready to be hooked up to TVs and with nice controllers.

Valve, please do it. But first, release Cold Stream for us Xbox peasants already, damnit.

The Next PlayStation is Called Orbis

While the official reveal of Sony’s next home console could still be months away, if not longer, Kotaku has today learned some important details concerning the PlayStation 3’s successor.

For one, the console’s name - or at least its codename/working title - is apparently Orbis. And it’s being planned for release in time for the 2013 holiday season.

The details in this story come from a reliable source who is not authorized to talk publicly about next-gen hardware but has shared correct information with us before. What they’re telling us in specifics matches much of what we’ve heard and reported in generalities in recent weeks.

A Sony spokesperson declined to comment about these details, citing the company’s policy not to comment on "rumors or speculation."

Orbis. Say it out loud. Sounds a little like the word "four", doesn’t it? Only it doesn’t make the next PlayStation sound like a bad horror movie sequel.

It’s also a name loaded with meaning. The word "Orbis" itself, from Latin, means circle, or ring, or even orbit. Not terribly helpful. Combine it with the name of Sony’s new handheld system, though, and you have the common term Orbis Vita (or, in strict Latin, Orbis Vitae). Which means "The circle of life". Could the Vita be playing a very important role in the development and use of the next PlayStation home console? Maybe!

Such symbolism also suggests that rather than being a codename, like most companies employ when still developing a console (think NGP, or Durango), this might actually be the machine’s final name. We don’t know that, though, so keep an open mind about things.

Type in Vita.SCEdevnet.com and you arrive at Sony’s portal for Vita developers. Same with NGP.SCEdevnet.com, referencing the former codename for the Vita. The PS4 version of that address gets you nowhere. PS3 does, as does Orbis.SCEDev.net, though not to any Orbis-specific portions of the site.

THE NEXT PLAYSTATION, AT A GLANCE

Is called, or at least carries the working codename, "Orbis".
Is scheduled for a Holiday 2013 release.
Won’t be backwards compatible with PS3 games.
Will lock new games to a PSN account as an anti-used games measure.
New games can be bought either on Blu-Ray or downloaded.
Current specs are an AMD x64 CPU and AMD Southern Islands GPU

CURRENT SPECS

Our main source supplied some basic specs for the console, but as the future is always in motion, bear in mind these could easily change between now and the Orbis’ retail release. Still, if you’d like to know what developers are being told to plan for now, here you go.

AMD x64 CPU
AMD Southern Islands GPU

The former, that’s largely something we’ve heard before, but the latter is interesting. That’s the name given to many of AMD’s 2012 roster of high-end PC cards. The PS4’s GPU in particular, we’re told, will be capable of displaying Orbis games at a resolution of up to 4096x2160, which is far in excess of the needs of most current HDTV sets. It’ll also be capable of playing 3D games in 1080p (the PS3 could only safely manage 3D at 720p).

Our main source tell us that "select developers" have been receiving dev kits for the new console since the beginning of this year. Revised and improved versions of these kits were sent out around GDC, while more finalised beta units will be shipped to developers towards the end of 2012.

That should hopefully give developers plenty of time to have launch games ready for the Orbis’ retail release, which will be in time for the 2013 holiday season. If you can remember the PS3 launch - it’s OK if you can’t, it was a while ago - that too was in time for the holiday shopping season (November 2006 for Japan and North America).

Remember how the PlayStation 3 swiftly dropped the ability to play PS2 games? Well, our main source tell us the Orbis won’t even bother, and that Sony has no plans to offer backwards compatibility for its existing catalogue of PS3 games.

A post left on Pastebin back in December also referred to the PlayStation 4 as Orbis, calling it a codename in the same vein as Microsoft’s Durango. The system specs in that post differ significantly from what Kotaku has heard, and the lack of a hard drive by default goes against the idea of downloading full games to the system.

The Pastebin post also mentions that big name developers like EA were disappointed by an Orbis much less powerful than Microsoft’s next machine, so there’s a chance that it’s the story of an earlier prototype that didn’t make the grade. We’ve reached out to EA for comment.

Just like the next Xbox/Durango, we’ve heard from multiple sources that the Orbis will likewise have some kind of anti-used games measures built into the console. Here’s how our main source says it’s currently shaping up: new games for the system will be available one of two ways,

either on a Blu-Ray disc or as a PSN download (yes, even full retail titles). If you buy the disc, it must be locked to a single PSN account, after which you can play the game, save the whole thing to your HDD, or peg it as "downloaded" in your account history and be free to download it at a later date.

Don’t think you can simply buy the disc and stay offline, though; like many PC games these days, you’ll need to have a PSN account and be online to even get the thing started. UPDATE - Since some people seem to have taken this to mean the console requires an "always on" intenet connection, we’ve heard nothing about that. All we’ve heard is that you need to authenticate a new game online via the PSN.

If you then decide to trade that disc in, the pre-owned customer picking it up will be limited in what they can do. While our sources were unclear on how exactly the pre-owned customer side of things would work, it’s believed used games will be limited to a trial mode or some other form of content restriction, with consumers having to pay a fee to unlock/register the full game.

This would allow used games to continue to be sold at outlets such as GameStop, while also appeasing major publishers who would no longer have to implement their own haphazard approaches to "online passes".

That’s all we’ve got for you at the moment. Remember, none of this information is confirmed, and even the information that is locked down in March 2012 may change before the console’s eventual release. This is just what we’ve been told Sony is working on and planning for as of today. That being the case, how do you think it’s shaping up?

The Next Xbox Will Play Blu-Ray

Microsoft will upgrade its disc technology for its next Xbox from DVDs to Blu-Ray discs, catching up to rival Sony, games industry sources tell Kotaku.

Sony’s PlayStation 3 currently supports Blu-Ray, which can contain 25 or 50GB of data compared to DVD’s 9GB.

But that disc detail could be far less impactful to the next generation of game consoles than the assertion I’ve heard from one reliable industry source that Microsoft intends to incorporate some sort of anti-used game system as part of their so-called Xbox 720.

It’s not clear if that means that the system wouldn’t play used games or how such a set-up would work. Obvious approaches - I’m theorizing here - like linking a copy of a game to a specific Xbox Live account could seemingly be foiled by used-game owners who would keep their system offline. My source wasn’t sure how Microsoft intended to implement any anti-used game system in the new machine.

A push in any way by Microsoft against used games would likely be cheered from publishers sick of seeing retailers like GameStop crow about their revenues from the sale of used games. But it could potentially anger consumers who rely on buying cheaply-sold used games or even pass games to relatives or friends.

One source familiar with Microsoft’s plans for the new Xbox said Microsoft plans to ship their new Xbox with a new version of its red-hot Kinect hands-free sensor system. The new Kinect would contain an on-board processor, a feature originally intended for the first Kinect. That processor would enable a new Kinect to more effectively detect users’ motions.

I’m also hearing that Microsoft is interested in making a smaller controller for its new console.

And what of gaming site IGN’s report that the machine could be six times more powerful than the Xbox 360? From some industry sources I’m hearing that that’s the right ballpark and that Microsoft is estimating they might even get to 8x the Xbox 360. But another insider clarified that no one in the industry has development kits yet and that any talk about specs right now is still hypothetical.

[UPDATE: A Microsoft rep e-mailed me the following statement: "As an innovator we’re always thinking about what is next and how we can push the boundaries of technology like we did with Kinect. We believe the key to extending the lifespan of a console is not just about the console hardware, but about the games and entertainment experiences being delivered to consumers. Beyond that we don’t comment on rumors or speculation."]

"Xbox 720" is being used as shorthand by reporters like me to refer to the next Xbox. It’s not necessarily the name of the next device. Tech sites Semi Accurate and Fudzilla have reported that the first chips for 720 development kits are going into production, leading to a possible late 2013 release despite my earlier reporting which had pointed to 2014 as the year of the next Xbox and PlayStation.

Nintendo’s next console, the Wii U, will go on sale later this year.

Valve Said To Be Working on ’Steam Box’ Gaming Console

Recently there’s been chatter that Valve - the company behind the massively popular gaming service Steam - has been considering getting into the hardware business. Specifically, there have been rumors that the company has been toying with the idea of creating a proper set-top console which could potentially pose a threat to the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Valve co-founder Gabe Newell even recently told Penny Arcade: "Well, if we have to sell hardware we will."

At a glance that would simply be interesting fodder for a gaming forum debate, but we’ve uncovered information that suggests that not only has Valve been secretly working on gaming hardware for the living room, but that the company is actively pursuing a strategy which would place Steam at the center of an open gaming universe that mirrors what Google has done with Android. Backing up that concept, in the same interview we quote above, Newell says that Valve doesn’t really want to do hardware on its own, stating, "We’d rather hardware people that are good at manufacturing and distributing hardware do [hardware]. We think it’s important enough that if that’s what we end up having to do, then that’s what we end up having to do."

That jibes pretty well with this rumored arrangement.

According to sources, the company has been working on a hardware spec and associated software which would make up the backbone of a "Steam Box." The actual devices may be made by a variety of partners, and the software would be readily available to any company that wants to get in the game.

Adding fuel to that fire is a rumor that the Alienware X51 may have been designed with an early spec of the system in mind, and will be retroactively upgradable to the software.

Apparently meetings were held during CES to demo a hand-built version of the device to potential partners. We're told that the basic specs of the Steam Box include a Core i7 CPU, 8GB of RAM, and an NVIDIA GPU. The devices will be able to run any standard PC titles, and will also allow for rival gaming services (like EA's Origin) to be loaded up.

Part of the goal of establishing a baseline for hardware, we're told, is that it will give developers a clear lifecycle for their products, with changes possibly coming every three to four years. Additionally, there won't be a required devkit, and there will be no licensing fees to create software for the platform.

We're hearing that a wide variety of USB peripherals will be compatible with the boxes, though it will likely ship with a proprietary controller. It's possible that the controller will even allow for swappable components, meaning that it can be reconfigured depending on the type of game you're playing. Think that sounds odd? Well Valve filed a patent for such a device last year.

Additionally, we're told that the kind of biometrics Valve uses in game testing will somehow be incorporated into these devices. Sources of ours say that the realtime biometric feedback in games will be a sea-change for users. To put it more succinctly, the sentiment we've heard is: "You won't ever look back." These biometric devices could come in the form of a bracelet, or be part of the standard controller.

The consoles will also take advantage of Steam's "Big Picture" mode, a feature Valve touted last year at GDC, but has yet to release to the public. According to the company's press release in 2011 "With big picture mode, gaming opportunities for Steam partners and customers become possible via PCs and Macs on any TV or computer display in the house."

The most interesting piece of this puzzle may be related to that statement. According to sources, the Steam Box isn't intended to just clash with current gaming consoles. Rather, Valve wants to take Apple and its forthcoming new Apple TV products head-on. Newell has clear questions about Apple's strategy, telling the The Seattle Times "On the platform side, it's sort of ominous that the world seems to be moving away from open platforms," adding that "They build a shiny sparkling thing that attracts users and then they control people's access to those things."

The Steam Box could be unveiled at GDC, though we're also hearing that the company may wait until E3 this year to show off what it's been working on.

One thing is for sure, however: if these rumors turn out to be correct, there could be a whole new kind of battle for control of your living room happening in the near future. Of course, much of this is pieced together from a variety of sources, and there could be moving parts which we can't see. Some of this information could change.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

EU Commission Wants Cyber Crime Center

The European Commission wants to set up a special center to deal with cyber crime to protect citizens against illegal online activities.

The Commission proposed Wednesday to make the center part of Europol, the European police agency headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands.

Large-scale cyber attacks have become increasingly sophisticated in the last few years, to the point that national financial systems have become vulnerable. The EU says the center would focus on credit card and bank credential fraud.

EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem said "as the online part of our everyday lives grows, organized crime is following suit - and these crimes affect each and every one of us."

Yahoo Shareholder Blasts Company

When Yahoo appointed three directors to its board on Sunday, it passed over a major Yahoo shareholder whose investment fund had been seeking four seats.

THE RESPONSE: Hedge fund manager Daniel Loeb described the snub as a glaring example of shoddy corporate governance in a letter Wednesday. He calls the decision "illogical."

YAHOO’S RESPONSE: Yahoo reiterated that it had been willing to add one of Loeb’s preferred candidates, turnaround specialist Harry Wilson, to its board, as well as one other director acceptable to both the company and Loeb’s fund. He rebuffed that suggestion and reiterated that he wants four seats.

Apple Gadget Maker Has ’Significant’ Labor Issues

Workplace abuses were uncovered in an audit that equated to "a full body scan" of three Chinese factories pumping out coveted Apple gadgets, independent investigators reported on Thursday.

Employees at each of the factories had exceeded a work-week limit of 76 hours set by Chinese law and, in some cases, worked more than seven days

straight without a required 24-hour break, according to the Fair Labor Association.

"The Fair Labor Association gave Apple's largest supplier the equivalent of a full-body scan through 3,000 staff hours investigating three of its factories and surveying more than 35,000 workers," said FLA president Auret van Heerden.

"Apple and its supplier Foxconn have agreed to our prescriptions, and we will verify progress and report publicly."

Along with excessive overtime and not always compensating workers properly for extra hours that were put in, the nearly month-long investigation uncovered health and safety risks and "crucial communication gaps."

Foxconn has pledged to bring factory conditions into full compliance with Chinese law and FLA standards regarding working hours by July of next year, according to the report.

"If implemented, these commitments will significantly improve the lives of more than 1.2 million Foxconn employees and set a new standard for Chinese factories," van Heerden said.

The report was released as Apple chief Tim Cook paid a visit to China, where state media said the man tipped to be country's next leader had told him foreign firms should do more to protect workers.

International labor watchdog groups have said workers in Chinese plants run by major Apple supplier Foxconn of Taiwan are poorly treated, and have blamed a string of apparent suicides on the conditions.

Vice Premier Li Keqiang, who is likely to be China's next premier, met Tim Cook while the new Apple chief executive was visiting Beijing on Tuesday, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Li told Cook multinational companies should "pay more attention to caring for workers," the report said.

Cook on Wednesday visited a Foxconn plant employing 120,000 people in China's central city of Zhengzhou, where he viewed the production line, Apple said.

California-based Apple is wildly popular in China, where its products such as the iPhone and iPad are coveted by wealthy consumers.

Apple Assembly Line Gets Pay Raise, Fewer Hours

Chinese workers who often spend more than 60 hours per week assembling iPhones and iPads will have their overtime hours curbed and their pay increased after a labor auditor hired by Apple Inc. inspected their factories.

The Fair Labor Association says Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., the Taiwanese company also known as Foxconn that runs the factories in China, is committing to a reduction of weekly work time to 49 hours, the legal Chinese maximum.

That limit is routinely ignored in factories throughout China. Auret van Heerden, CEO of the Fair Labor Association, said Foxconn is the first Chinese company to commit to following the legal standard.

Apple's and FLA's own guidelines call for work weeks of 60 hours or less.

Foxconn's moves are likely to have an impact across the global technology industry. The company employs 1.2 million workers in China to assemble products for Apple, Microsoft Corp., Hewlett-Packard Co. and other pillars of U.S. technology.

Foxconn's factories are the last step in the process of manufacturing iPhones and other Apple devices, most of which have hundreds of components. Research firm IHS iSuppli estimates that Apple pays $8 for the assembly of a 16-gigabyte iPhone 4S and $188 for its components. It sells the phone wholesale for about $600 to phone companies, which then subsidize it to be able to sell it for $200 with a two-year service contract.

Ricardo Ernst, a professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, said companies play a risky game when they raise their manufacturing costs because they can be undercut by competitors.

But iSuppli's figures suggest that if Apple were to absorb a Foxconn wage increase that keeps salaries level while cutting average working hours from 60 to 49 per week, it would pay less than $2 extra to have an iPhone made.

Other electronics companies, particularly PC makers such as Dell and HP, earn less profit on what they sell and could see a deeper impact.

Thomas Dinges, an analyst at iSuppli, said Apple's competitors will probably have to accept the price increase too, since it's framed as a moral issue.

"At this point, it's politics. It's not really economics," he said, adding that there are few alternatives to Chinese factories for most of these products.

The FLA auditors visited three Foxconn complexes in February and March: Guanlan and Longhua near the coastal manufacturing hub of Shenzhen, and Chengdu in the inland province of Sichuan. They employ a total of 178,000 workers, with an average age of 23.

Average monthly salaries at the factories ranged from $360 to $455. Foxconn recently raised salaries by up to 25 percent in the second major salary hike in less than two years.

Apple enormous profits - $13 billion in October-to-December quarter - have made it the world's most valuable company, worth more than $570 billion. It's also put the spotlight on the way its products are made.

In a one-man Broadway play, actor Mike Daisey told of visiting China and talking to underage and injured Foxconn workers. Public radio program "This American Life" used Daisey's monologue in a show about Foxconn on Jan. 6, but retracted it two weeks ago, saying that Daisey had fabricated key parts of it, including him meeting 13-year-old workers.

The FLA said it didn't find instances of child or forced labor.

Apple has kept a close watch on its suppliers for years and in January

took the further step of joining the FLA. The organization has audited overseas suppliers for clothing manufacturers, but Apple was the first electronics company to join. It also commissioned the FLA to produce a special audit of Foxconn’s factories.

"Our team has been working for years to educate workers, improve conditions and make Apple’s supply chain a model for the industry, which is why we asked the FLA to conduct these audits," Apple said in a statement.

Apple CEO Tim Cook visited a Foxconn factory in Zhengzhou, China, on Wednesday.

The Washington-based FLA has its roots in a 1996 meeting of multinational companies and nonprofits convened by President Clinton, who challenged corporate leaders to improve conditions for garment and shoe workers. Its 19-member board is composed of representatives from member companies, universities and nonprofits like the Global Fairness Initiative. The organization is funded by participating companies.

Labor unions have criticized Apple’s use of the FLA, insisting that audits are a "top-down" approach. Foxconn’s workers would be better served, they believe, by being able to organize.

"The report will include new promises by Apple that stand to be just as empty as the ones made over the past 5 years," said SumOfUS.org, a coalition of trade unions and consumer groups, ahead of the release of the report.

The FLA found few safety violations, noting that the company had already dealt with problems like blocked fire exits and defective protective gear. It’s also taken step to reduce the amount of aluminum dust in the air, after the metal created an explosion at a Foxconn factory in Chengdu last year, killing four workers.

The FLA said Foxconn has been recording only accidents that caused work stoppage but is now committing to recording and addressing all accidents that result in an injury.

Heerden said his auditors found Foxconn workers are the happiest with their jobs when they work 52 hours a week, well below the amount they often put in. Reducing their hours to 49 hours should help Foxconn retain workers in the long run, he said.

The FLA found that many workers at the Foxconn factories want to work even more overtime, so they can make more money. Foxconn told the FLA that it will raise hourly salaries to compensate workers for the reduced hours.

Heerden said that it’s common to find workers in developing countries looking for more overtime, rather than less.

"They’re often single, they’re young, and there’s not much to do, so frankly they’d just rather work and save," he said.

The auditors examined one years’ worth of payroll and time records at each factory, conducted interviews with some workers and had 35,000 of them fill out anonymous surveys.

Apple has started tracking the working hours of half a million workers in

its supply chain, and said that 89 percent of them worked 60 hours or less in February, even though the company was ramping up production of the new iPad. Workers averaged 48 hours per week.

Online Advertisers Cautioned Against Privacy Blunders

Online advertisers facing scrutiny from governments wanting to give Internet users more control over personal data online were urged at an industry conference on Wednesday to avoid privacy blunders that could undermine calls for self-regulation.

The White House and Federal Trade Commission have unveiled privacy frameworks that rely heavily on voluntary commitments by the advertisers to address lack of controls over the collection and trading of vast amounts of detailed information about the online activities and real-life identities of consumers.

Google Inc, Facebook Inc, Apple Inc and other technology companies have lobbied against congressional and federal agency proposals that crack down on data collection.

Companies also have a close eye on European Union proposals that would give Internet users the right to bar any collection of personal data.

"If you don’t want to be regulated, do it yourself," the Council of Better Business Bureau’s Genie Barton warned participants at a conference held by the Association of National Advertisers (ANA).

Barton, vice president and director of the organization’s online behavioral advertising program, said the U.S. government’s stance on privacy is very close to the principles of the Digital Advertising Alliance’s (DAA) self-regulatory program followed by 90 percent of the ad industry.

"Right now, we have a confidence-building exercise where we can use the existing DAA program to continue to prove to the FTC that we as an industry can adequately regulate ourselves," said privacy expert Amy Mushahwar, an attorney with Reed Smith.

But the EU has not endorsed self-regulation.

"The EU is still highly distrustful of anything but heavy regulation. It is, however, recognizing that the privacy bill of rights is a big step," Barton said.

The White House called last month for a "privacy bill of rights," while the FTC on Monday pushed the industry to implement by the end of the year a Do Not Track system that would let consumers click a button on their Internet browsers to ensure their data is not being collected.

Barton said a further "softening in Europe" appeared to be occurring thanks to the DAA pledge to create a Do Not Track solution.

FTC Chairman Jon Leibowitz earlier in the week commended the progress the industry has made on this front, but said it was clear more was needed.

Last year’s findings from the FTC that Facebook and Google engaged in

deceptive privacy practices, and embarrassing revelations that Internet companies secretly tracked the locations of users, sold data to advertisers without the knowledge of consumers and other blunders have not helped the argument for self-regulation.

At stake is a billion-dollar industry. Advertising dollars account for about 96 percent of Google's revenue and 85 percent of Facebook's, financial statements and filings showed.

Data collection on the Internet allows advertisers to target users in a demographic who are more likely to buy their product. These ads often subsidize Web content.

"On issue after issue that is critical to our community, I believe the Congress and the regulatory agencies are setting the table for major action," said Dan Jaffe, ANA's vice president of government relations.

"We have learned that, if we're not at the table when it's being set, we will be on the menu."

Jaffe said privacy and the future of advertising self-regulation were among the top issues the trade group would be focused on this year.

Particularly, the group will fight an EU push to move U.S. data collection policy toward an opt-in system he said would have a destructive impact on the growth of the Internet.

Reed Smith's Mushahwar said this is as much a legal clash as it is a shake out of an economic model.

"Ultimately, what we don't want to have happen is moving towards the European standard and then having companies that are not able to optimize their websites and optimize their revenue," Mushahwar added.

Google Lets Users Monitor Their Online Activity

Google on Wednesday began letting people get monthly reports summarizing what they have been up to at the Internet titan's free online services.

A freshly-added feature keeps people posted on patterns at Gmail, YouTube, online search and other Google venues visited while signed into their user accounts with the California-based company.

"Sometimes it's helpful to step back and take stock of what you're doing online," Google product manager Andreas Tuerk said in a blog post announcing the "Account Activity" feature.

"Knowing more about your own account activity also can help you take steps to protect your Google Account."

He gave an example of a report potentially revealing that someone's account was signed into from countries they have not visited or from gadgets they don't own.

Google will incorporate more of its services into Account Activity reports in coming months, according to Tuerk.

Those who sign up with get password-protected links to reports and tools to manage account privacy.

The new feature was introduced the same month that Google rolled out a new privacy policy allowing the firm to track users across various services to develop targeted advertising, despite criticism from consumer advocacy groups.

Google contends the move simplifies and unifies its policies across its various services such as Gmail, YouTube, Android mobile systems, Google+ social network and Internet search.

But critics including European privacy agencies and US consumer watchdogs argued the new policy, which offers no ability to opt out aside from refraining from signing into Google services, gives the Internet giant unprecedented ability to monitor its users. And some say it violates EU privacy protections.

Google said the changes are designed to improve the user experience across the various products, and give the firm a more integrated view of its users, an advantage enjoyed by Apple and Facebook.

Welcome to The Future of Firefox

After two years of regular updates, we ll end our support for Firefox 3.6 on April 24th. In the years since Firefox 3.6, we ve make incredible improvements to Firefox, including phenomenal HTML5 capabilities, Firefox Sync, faster JavaScript performance, support for the Do Not Track header, and an easier, quieter update process. Barring any major stability or security issues found over the next few weeks, Firefox 3.6.28 will be our last 3.6 release.

We strongly advise our users to upgrade from Firefox 3.6, as they will no longer receive critical security updates as of April 24th. In support of Firefox 3.6 users in organizations, we ve delivered on our promise to implement the Extended Support Release plan three months ahead of ending support for Firefox 3.6. Enterprises and organizations should complete qualification and deployment of the ESR over the next month.

We d also like to take this opportunity to announce that our minimum supported Windows version will change from Windows 2000 to Windows XP SP2 in Firefox 13. We never change minimum requirements lightly, but this support change allows us to significantly improve Firefox performance on Windows by using a more modern build system. Windows XP users are advised to update to the latest service pack, and Windows 2000 users should consider upgrading ahead of the June release of Firefox 13.

Wi-Fi Is Evolving, Should You Keep Up?

Wi-Fi has become an essential part of our lives. For most of us, it s second nature to tap into wireless Internet from our homes and offices, and we re all too familiar with the "where can I get free Wi-Fi without having to buy something?" dance when out and about. For both traditional notebook computers and mobile devices like phones, gaming devices, and

and tablets, Wi-Fi has revolutionized the way we access the Internet. In most homes, it has even replaced the need for wired networks: Why bother with Ethernet, hubs, and complicated cabling when so much can be handled via Wi-Fi? Desktop computers, televisions, game consoles, set-top boxes - heck, even thermostats all routinely rely on Wi-Fi.

These days, most Wi-Fi is 802.11n, technology that started to roll out in 2007 and theoretically offers wireless throughput of up to 300 megabits per second per stream. However, Wi-Fi is about to get an upgrade in the form of 802.11ac, which will not only offer a boost in bandwidth (up to 433 or 867 megabits per second per stream, depending on channel width) but should offer more reliable connections.

Even though the 802.11ac standard isn t set to be finalized until 2013, 802.11ac gear should start to appear on shelves in the next few months. What are the advantages? Should you jump on board right away, or wait until the technology matures?

The Wi-Fi standards process is a little counter-intuitive. The complete specification for 802.11ac, the next generation of Wi-Fi, isn t likely to be completely defined until late in 2013. The process is largely controlled by the Wi-Fi Alliance, a trade consortium that owns the Wi-Fi trademark. However, at this January s CES trade show in Las Vegas, device makers were already showing off products based on the technology, and the first devices claiming to support 802.11ac will be on same by mid-year.

Something similar happened with 802.11n Wi-Fi. Device makers were eager to jump on the faster Wi-Fi technology, so they began building so-called ’draft N’ hardware based on draft versions of the 802.11n specification, essentially gambling that the final version of the specification would not be so different that their early products would be incompatible. Draft-N hardware hit the market in 2007, and the Wi-Fi Alliance started certifying devices compatible based on the second draft of the spec. However, the final 802.11n spec wasn t published until October 2009, by which point 802.11n devices had been on the market for almost two years. Device makers were in a rock and a hard place: Either jump the gun on the spec and risk building hardware incompatible with the final technology, or wait and be locked out of a potentially very lucrative market. After all, everybody wanted faster, more-reliable Wi-Fi.

The same thing is happening with 802.11ac. Work on the specification has already been underway for years, and the Initial Technical Specification (draft 0.1!) was published over a year ago. In the last few months, Quantenna, Redpine, and Broadcom have all announced 802.11ac technology targeting everything from base stations to smartphones. Even though the standard likely won t be finalized until the end of 2013, device makers are already rushing to get their 802.11ac to market - they don t want to be left behind.

802.11ac Wi-Fi promises to be an improvement on the same scale as the transition from 802.11g to today s nearly ubiquitous 802.11n Wi-Fi. In very loose terms, 802.11ac should offer about four times the bandwidth of todays 802.11n Wi-Fi. That means faster downloads, and that could translate directly to better use of battery power, since devices Wi-Fi radios will be able to process more data in less time.

Folks who have embraced 802.11n Wi-Fi won t have to throw anything away: 802.11ac is backward compatible with 802.11n. Those relying on 802.11n won t see any improvements, but bringing 802.11ac devices or base stations into the mix won t be disruptive.

Looking a little bit deeper, 802.11ac Wi-Fi offers some major improvements over 802.11n that will help networks support a larger number of high-bandwidth devices as well as make connections more reliable.

Less interference - 802.11n (and all earlier Wi-Fi standards) operate in the unlicensed 2.4GHz frequency band, which is famously shared by everything from cordless phones to Bluetooth devices to baby monitors to microwave ovens. Basically, tons of things can interfere with today s Wi-Fi, and anyone who has tried to get a reliable Wi-Fi connection in a location filled with 2.4GHz devices knows how frustrating that can be. 802.11ac shifts Wi-Fi up to to the 5GHz band, away from common forms of interference. Thus, 802.11ac connections should be more reliable, particularly in homes, offices, and other environments that use other forms of wireless technology. Furthermore, in many cases the 5GHz band offers better penetration of ceilings and walls, enabling better reception in buildings.

Shifting to the 5GHz band doesn t mean 802.11ac will be magically immune to interference. Some cordless phones and things like WHDI wireless high-def video also run in the 5MHz band, and existing dual-band Wi-Fi solutions are already operating there. (Normally, this is to separate 802.11n traffic from slowpokes running 802.11g or earlier - ’pure’ 802.11n networks can stay out of the 2.4GHz space entirely.) The 5GHz band is currently much less crowded than the 2.4 Ghz band, meaning 802.11ac will be more reliable than Wi-Fi solutions that have to rely on 2.4 GHz channels.

More speed - Existing 802.11n Wi-Fi has a maximum channel width of 40MHz (actually, two 20MHz channels). 802.11ac can double or even quadruple that to 80MHz or 160MHz per channel, thanks to operating entirely in the 5GHz band. In the 2.4GHz band, a 40MHz channel consumes more than 80 percent of the unlicensed band, which just isn t practical in many locations. Quite a lot more frequency bandwidth is available up in the 5 GHz band, and 802.11ac leverages it.

A single 80MHz channel running 802.11ac can theoretically handle up to 433Mbps - that s already faster than a typical 802.11n configuration. However, just like 802.11n, both access points and devices can theoretically pack multiple antennas, giving them more connections and more throughput. As you might expect, a two-antenna system running 80MHz channels offers double the theoretical bandwidth of a one-antenna system, so 867 Mbps. Bump that up to four antennas and you re up to 1.73Gbps. Eight antennas? In theory, you re up to 3.47Gbps - but, of course, most people aren t going to have to devices with eight antennas, each talking communicating with each other exclusively. However, these figures only account for 80MHz channels: If the devices support the optional 160 MHz channels, you can double these theoretical bandwidth figures again. So, a single 160MHz channel running 802.11ac should peak at 867Mbps. That s in the same category as wired gigabit (1000Base-T) Ethernet. A dual antenna system with 160MHz channels could double that: 1.73 Gbps.

Of course, reality won t usually be so snappy. Those figures reflect optimum conditions and assume just a single pair of Wi-Fi devices. Reality is rarely so neat. Nonetheless, 802.11ac technology should be a significant improvement over 802.11n in most situations.

Improved stream management - On the geekiest end of the spectrum, 802.11ac also builds on technologies introduced with 802.11n to better manage data streams. Each 802.11ac device (regardless of the number of antennas) will be able to transmit or received independent data streams at the same

time. Furthermore, those streams will be separated spatially, rather than by frequency. Spacial stream resolution is kind of science-fictional stuff, and is similar to MIMO technologies in 802.11n: In a nutshell, devices have smart antennas that enable them to determine the approximate locations of devices in an area, and tailor their transmission toward those devices using phased array technologies - so, instead of broadcasting all data to everything in range, devices are able to target their transmissions, significantly improving efficiency and performance while reducing interference.

Does faster Wi-Fi mean faster Internet?

So 802.11ac means Wi-Fi devices will have faster Internet, right? Well, not necessarily - and for most home users, the answer is probably ’no.’

Although 802.11ac Wi-Fi may be able to tick along at speeds approaching (or in excess) of gigabit Ethernet, most users home Internet connections don t run at anywhere near that capacity. Even top-tier home Internet services like Verizon FiOS and Comcast can deliver up to 100Mbps or 150Mbps in bandwidth. That s about one fifth to one tenth of the bandwidth 802.11ac can handle. In other words, even the fastest home broadband connections will be a bottleneck to an 802.11ac network. Data from the Internet isn t going to reach 802.11ac Wi-Fi devices appreciably faster than it reaches 802.11n (or even 802.11g) devices.

Of course, most Americans with home broadband operate at considerably slower speeds: Akamai s most recent State of the Internet report (for the third quarter of 2011) found the average broadband connection speed in the United States was 6.14Mbps. The figure for home users would be even lower, since Akamai s average includes bandwidth-endowed universities, government agencies, and corporations.

However, 802.11ac does mean users will be able to push data around their home networks faster - particularly if (any) wired portions of that network use gigabit Ethernet. That means arduous tasks like backing up your entire media collection will take substantially less time; it also means that synchronizing data, offloading photos and videos from mobile devices to a computer, and even streaming video to set-top boxes and game consoles will be much smoother, and more of that activity can happen at the same time without stutters or hiccups.

For businesses, schools, and organizations that have gone to the trouble to install high-capacity networks and major Internet bandwidth at their sites, 802.11ac technology could very well yield a significant improvement in overall Internet performance.

Since most everyday technology users probably aren t going to see tremendous immediate benefits from 802.11ac technology, I recommend holding off. As users replace computers, smartphones, tablets, and other Wi-Fi devices, those will gradually come with 802.11ac built-in, just as devices come with 802.11n Wi-Fi as standard tech now. As those devices multiply, there may come an obvious point where upgrading base stations or routers to 802.11ac makes sense. For users already on 802.11n networks, that day may never come: Their new devices with 802.11ac Wi-Fi may spend their entire useful lives operating on 802.11n networks.

For folks who still haven t upgraded their home networks to 802.11n - we know you re out there! - now might be a good time to pick up a dual-mode 802.11n router. You ll have backward compatibility with existing 802.11b/g devices, but be able to support 802.11n and (when they come out) 802.11ac devices.

People building new networks - whether for homes or business - should consider going with 802.11ac as long as they don t need to support pre-N devices. You may be able to ’future-proof’ your network well into the future - it wouldn t be unreasonable to expect a 802.11ac network to serve your Wi-Fi needs adequately through 2017. However, until the standard is finalized, there s always the chance your gear may be left behind - and no guarantee the manufacturer will be able to upgrade it to support the final standard. So choose your gear carefully, and make sure manufacturers are wiling to update their gear, if necessary, to match the final 802.11ac standard.

Believe It Or Not, Email Is Still The Killer App

What s the Internet s "killer app?" You know, that thing that makes the Internet so necessary and coveted people have to have it. Is it Facebook, with its more than 850 million users? How about Twitter, with an estimated 500 million users? What about Amazon, with an estimated 100 million customers worldwide? What about instant messaging? VoIP? Streaming video - maybe YouTube or Netflix? What about BitTorrent?

Believe it or not, the answer is still email. Humble, humble email.

According to a new international poll conducted by Ipsos Global Public Affairs on behalf of Reuters, some 85 percent of Internet users around the world use email for communication. However, there does seem to be a major shift underway when it comes to social media: Worldwide, some 62 percent of Internet users communicate via social networking sites, and in some countries the percentages are much higher, with nearly three quarters of all Argentines, Russians, and South Africans visiting social media sites. However, some cultures simply haven t embraced it: in Japan, only 35 percent of online users tap into social media services.

Why is email still so popular after more than 30 years, and how are social media and newer forms of Internet communication stacking up?
You ve got mail

Email owes its popularity to its ubiquitousness and low technical requirements. Although a stunning amount of email traffic these days relies on HTML formatting, embedded images, file attachments, and other enhancements, core email technology hasn t changed much in three decades. Yup! The mechanisms for Internet email were first codified way back in 1982 with RFC 821, written by Internet legend Jon Postel. Postel laid out the essential messaging framework for Internet-connected computers (what today we d call ISPs or service providers) to exchange and forward messages. To be sure, the technology was raw and has been updated many times since (attachments and multi-part messages were standardized in the early 1990s, for instance). And arguably, the initial implementation of email gave birth to the spamming industry. But the bottom line is that you can still build a bare-bones email system using the technology Postel laid out in 1982 - in fact, that s not an uncommon exercise in introductory computing classes.

This simplicity and longevity means it s easy to build email support into virtually any Internet-capable device or service. And nine times out of ten the work has already been done. Long-standing, well-tested email clients and systems are already out there just waiting to be plugged in.

The result is that email is essentially the single Internet service available to almost any Internet user, whether they re connected via a notebook 35,000 feet over Nebraska, noodling on a handheld gaming system at the back of a classroom, trying to ignore their mobile phone during a boring meeting, or waiting for a seat at an Internet cafe in Shanghai - almost everyone has access to email.

Ipsos s poll results resoundingly confirm email s popularity. Across the 24 countries where respondents were polled, 85 percent of respondents use the Internet to send and receive email within the previous three months. Some countries have even higher proportions: the leader is actually Hungary, where 95 percent of users send and receive email. Sweden, Belgium, Indonesia, Argentina, and Poland all have email use rates of 90 percent or more. Developed Western economies like the the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Canada aren t far behind - rates are all between 88 and 90 percent - with China, South Africa, Australia, and Russia all above the global average with email penetration at 87 or 86 percent.

Where is email not widely used? Of the 24 counties surveyed, Saudi Arabia ranked last, with 46 percent of respondents saying they used email. (It may be worth noting Saudi Arabia is the only absolute monarchy represented in the poll, but it s not the only majority-Muslim nation: Turkey and Indonesia are also in the mix.) The next lowest-ranked country in the poll was India, where 68 percent of respondents reported using email.

As a small example of the power of email, a separate Ipsos poll found that consumers vastly prefer to receive promotions and special offers via email rather than text, even though shopping with smartphone-in-hand is on the rise.

So how is social networking shaping up as a killer app? Better in some places than others. Across the 24 countries in the poll, the overall penetration rate for social networking was 62 percent. However, in Indonesia the rate was a stunning 83 percent, a surprising 7 percent higher than second-place Argentina, where 76 percent of users claimed to have used social media in the previous three months. And there are more surprises in the list of countries that landed above the global average: Russia, South Africa, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, Mexico, Poland, Great Britain, and Turkey all reported social media use rates of 65 percent or higher, and Brazil was right in the middle with 62 percent.

Notice anything missing from that list? Lots of developed western economies. The United States is just below the global average for social media use, with a 61 percent score. Italy matches that 61 percent; Australia, Belgium, Canada, and France are even lower with 60, 57, 55, 53, and 50 percent of respondents saying they use social media, respectively. They re all beaten or (at best) matched by China and India, which each had rates of 60 percent.

Where is social networking not seeing strong adoption? Again, Saudi Arabia is an outlier, with an adoption rate of just 42 percent. But if there s one place where social media has been a dud, it s Japan: just 35 percent of respondents say they d used social media in the previous three months.

To be sure, all these figures represent strong adoption rates. Any technology would be considered a stunning success with these figures. And Ipsos s definition of social media is very broad: it includes not just outright social networking services like Facebook and Twitter, but also

things like online forums and blogs.

On a global basis, social media s impact is clear: the majority of Internet users - more than 6 out of 10 - have embraced social media as a communication tool. That s incredibly impressive for technology that s really less than 10 years old. Further, social media is often fundamentally different from email because users tend to engage with entire communities, rather than individuals.

VoIP and online dating

The Ipsos poll also looked at respondents use of VoIP and online dating. VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) has been hailed for years as a revolutionary communications technology because it enabled the equivalent of international phone calls for free or (when connecting to landlines or mobile networks) at greatly reduced dates. The standout in the field has been Skype, which was acquired by then spun off from eBay earlier in the decade, then snapped up by Microsoft almost a year ago in an $8.5 billion deal. The industry wisdom at the time was that Microsoft s embrace of VoIP technology would take the technology mainstream.

Windows 8 will be the first version to integrate Skype at a deep level, and only time will tell if Microsoft will see success with it. However, if Ipsos poll is any indicator, that success is likely to be overseas rather than in Microsoft s home markets. Globally, the poll finds an average of just 14 percent of Internet users use VoIP technology - that s not even 3 out of 20 people. However, VoIP does see much stronger adoption rates in some markets. Russia leads the way with over one third (36 percent) reporting they use VoIP - then come Turkey, India, Hungary, and (surprisingly) Saudi Arabia, with rates all above 20 percent.

Where has VoIP failed to catch on? Brazil and France are at the bottom of the pack, with just 4 and 5 percent of respondents saying they ve used VoIP. The United States is right there at the bottom, with just 6 percent of respondents using VoIP.

In developed economies, adoption of VoIP may be hindered by the easy availability of traditional phone networks. Many mobile services eliminate domestic long-distance charges. Lack of VoIP adoption may signal that users communications needs are being met by traditional services, and that VoIP is more strongly embraced in countries where users have more need for international calling or working around local communications operators.

And online dating? It s only a hit in Brazil. The poll found, on average, 11 percent of respondents have used the Internet for online dating. The United States and Japan were at the bottom of the list, with just 4 percent and 2 percent of respondents saying they used online dating services. However, some 52 percent of Brazilian respondents said they used the Internet for online dating - that s double the percentage of Russia, which came in at number two with 26 percent. And, curiously, Saudi Arabia was in third place with 24 percent. Across all 24 countries, the poll found 14 percent of men use online dating services, but only 8 percent of women.

Email may remain Internet users most-common communication medium, but the fact remains that most Internet users probably find email frustrating. Between spam, formatting problems, synchronization issues, and trying to manage multiple addresses, even longtime Internet vets find managing email a frustrating experience. There have been lots of attempts to unseat email as the Internet s killer app - Facebook Messages is probably the latest

high-profile effort. Will any of them ever succeed?

Probably not anytime soon. Email has more than history on its side; it has ubiquity and very low fundamental requirements. Social networking services including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and others all have relatively high technological bars. Web-based services are constantly dropping older browers, or introducing new features that only work on particular platforms. Mobile apps for smartphones and tablets may be comparatively lightweight compared to a full-blown Web browser, but they re also subject to rapid technological shifts. One need look no further than Twitter s so-called ’OAuthcalypse’ that wiped scores of third-party Twitter clients from the planet, and left many users without upgrade paths. Similarly, some people have been left behind when services like Facebook Chat drop support for older browsers, and when services rely on things like Flash, HTML5, or other technologies that may not be widely deployed. Yes, millions and millions of social media users will upgrade their gear to keep in touch with their friends, families, and communities. But for every upgrade and raised requirement, the pool of people who can participate shrinks before it gets larger.

But email? A twenty-year-old computer can connect to the Internet and receive email just fine. Email just works - and it doesn t look like anything is going to change that in the near future.

Anonymous Probably Won’t Shut Down the Internet This Weekend

Twitter handles associated with Anonymous are suggesting that "Operation Blackout," a rumored attempt to shut down the Internet scheduled for March 31, was never an officially sanctioned plan.

Operation Blackout calls for a highly-focused Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack on what it said are the Internet’s 13 root Domain Name System (DNS) servers. It was announced in February as a protest against SOPA, Wall Street and "our irresponsible leaders and the beloved bankers who are starving the world."

The release suggested such an attack would temporarily disable the DNS system, which turns a web address such as "www.mashable.com" into an IP address that directs a user’s browser to the proper server. That’s not exactly the same as taking down the entire Internet, but Anonymous said that didn’t matter.

"Anybody entering ’http://www.google.com’ or ANY other url, will get an error page, thus, they will think the Internet is down, which is, close enough," reads the release. "Remember, this is a protest, we are not trying to ’kill’ the Internet, we are only temporarily shutting it down where it hurts the most."

As the weekend drew nearer, Twitter accounts associated with Anonymous denied such an attack was on the horizon.

> What is this #OperationGlobalBlackout nonsense? I thought we settled this back in February? It won’t happen. Stop asking us about it! >.<
>
> * Anonymous (@YourAnonNews) March 29, 2012

> For the billionth time: #Anonymous will not shut down the Internet on

31 March. #OpGlobalBlackout is just another #OpFacebook failop. #yawn

* Anonymous (@YourAnonNews) March 30, 2012

The account also argued that such an attack would be self-defeating. If Anonymous shut down the web, it would be removing the forum the group uses to express its political and ideological grievances.

Think for a moment: Why would #Anonymous shut down our playground, the Internet? Really, how would that help ANY of us? #NextQuestion

* Anonymous (@YourAnonNews) March 30, 2012

Even though this account is backing off "Operation Blackout," Anonymous prides itself on its leaderless structure - so an operation may be carried out by a small handful of members in the group's name. However, even if Anonymous (or part of Anonymous) attempted such an attack, many cybersecurity experts doubt it would be successful.

"It's not even technically feasible," says Dave Marcus, director of security research at McAfee Labs. According to Marcus, the DNS system has a great deal of redundancy, security and load-balancing measures in place.

"That doesn t mean if they tried, there wouldn't be odd consequences with routers and other things like that," says Marcus. "But they re not going to be able to knock the DNS servers offline. The thing that would worry me is what would happen to traffic along the way. Let's say you can't get to an exit on expressway that you want to get to, and everyone else is trying to get there as well. It creates odd routing problems and unintended consequences."

Marcus added that Anonymous would need tens of thousands of connections (or botnets) to even attempt such an attack, a number likely to be beyond their capabilities.

Matthew Prince, CEO of CloudFare, pointed out that the idea of DNS relying on only 13 servers is a fallacy.

"There are hundreds of other servers scattered across multiple locations," says Prince. "Those servers are regularly under attack, they ve sustained fairly massive attacks launched against them and they are run fully redundantly. I think the likelihood anyone could knock the root server system offline is extremely low."

Prince added that Anonymous once unsuccessfully tried to take down Amazon - and if Amazon could withstand an attack, the DNS system certainly could. If need be, says Prince, outside organizations like his would "step up" to host backup DNS servers.

"I think you would see other organizations stepping up to add additional resources to mitigate an attack," says Prince. "There are more good guys on the Internet than bad guys - and we d bind together fairly quickly to ensure the Internet continued to run."

Do you think Operation Blackout is an officially-sanctioned Anonymous event, or is it just a rumor? Sound off in the comments below.

1. CIA Website

Hacked: CIA website, in addition to several international law enforcement

accounts Date of Incident: Feb. 3, 2012 What’s Known: Anonymous made Feb. 3, 2012 the "day of action" of coordinated efforts to take down several government web properties. In the CIA.gov hack, personal data from Alabama court papers - Social Security numbers, birthdays and addresses - were exposed. Confidential emails from a Mexican mining agency were also released. The same day, hackers forced their way into a conference call between the FBI and Scotland Yard, the UK’s Metropolitan Police Service. The 16-minute call was posted on YouTube with the headline "Hacked for the Lulz." Arrests: British teens Ryan Cleary and Jake Davis were arrested in connection with the hacked conference call. British officials who gained possession of Cleary’s hard drive described him as "a 15-year-old kid who s basically just doing this all for attention and is a bit of an idiot."

Microsoft Censors Pirate Bay Links in Windows Live Messenger

The Pirate Bay is not only the most visited BitTorrent site on the Internet, but arguably the most censored too. Many ISPs have been ordered to block their customers access to the website, and recently Microsoft joined in on the action by stopping people sharing its location with others. Microsoft s Windows Live Messenger (MSN) now refuses to pass on links to The Pirate Bay website, claiming they are unsafe.

Imagine that you found this great new band sharing their music on BitTorrent for free.

You re actually so excited about this find you want to share the experience with friends, so you paste them a link to the official torrent file via Windows Live Messenger.

Although this might sound like a good idea to some, Microsoft appears to disagree. Those who try to paste a Pirate Bay link to their friends through Windows Live Messenger will notice that it never reaches its destination.

Instead, Microsoft alerts the sender that The Pirate Bay is unsafe. Apparently, the company is actively monitoring people s communications to prevent them from linking to sites they deem to be a threat.

The same happens in other chat clients such as Pidgin when using a Windows Live Messenger account.

Whatever Microsoft s reason for monitoring private conversations and then swallowing Pirate Bay links, the Redmond-based company s censorship policies are not very consistent. All of the other large BitTorrent sites remain unaffected, even though they offer content that s identical to The Pirate Bay.

While it s not clear whether the above is related to copyright concerns, censorship is indisputably an up-and-coming tool to protect the interests of the entertainment industries. Taking away your freedom of speech one link at a time.

Illegal File Sharing Isn’t ’Stealing’: Here’s Why

Since the invention of Napster in 1999, and the online file-sharing boom that followed, the entertainment industry has spend countless millions attempting to convince the public that illegally downloading music or videos from the Internet is tantamount to sticking a gun in a person s face and demanding his wallet. "Content theft," they say, is just as bad as any other type of "stealing." But according to Stuart P. Green, a Rutgers Law School professor and expert on theft law, copyright infringement isn t really "stealing" at all.

The crux of Green s argument - which mimics that of many who have discussed this issue with any amount of critical thinking in the past - is that, in order to actually "steal" something, you must deprive the owner of whatever that thing is. If you take my bicycle, then you have it, and I don t. But if you download a song off The Pirate Bay, you ve simply made a copy - now there are two bicycles. (Or thousands or millions.)

"If Cyber Bob illegally downloads Digital Joe s song from the Internet, it s crucial to recognize that, in most cases, Joe hasn t lost anything," writes Green in an op-ed for The New York Times. "Yes, one might try to argue that people who use intellectual property without paying for it steal the money they would have owed had they bought it lawfully. But there are two basic problems with this contention. First, we ordinarily can t know whether the downloader would have paid the purchase price had he not misappropriated the property. Second, the argument assumes the conclusion that is being argued for - that it is theft."

Indeed. According to the Center for Copyright Information (CCI) - a propagandist entity set up by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) to oversee the upcoming "six strikes" anti-piracy system - file sharing costs the U.S. economy $58 billion annually, and has led to the elimination of 373,000 American jobs. It is industry-spouted figures like this that led Congress to consider the dangerously vague Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and PROTECT IP Act (PIPA). And it seems unfathomable that the entertainment industry will change their tune anytime soon, despite the fact that equating file sharing with "stealing" or "theft" just doesn t resonate with the public at large.

That s not to say that copyright infringement is morally justifiable. (Though some argue that it is.) As Green notes, it would be more appropriate to use "concepts like unauthorized use, trespass, conversion, and misappropriation" to condemn file sharing than "stealing" and "theft." I m not entirely convinced of that, either, since I doubt these terms mean anything at all to most people, even if they are more accurate, ethically speaking.

Regardless, I highly recommend checking out Green s op-ed; it s well worth the read. Besides, if you simply read this article, and not that one, then I will have effectively stolen a page view from The New York Times - or something like that.

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